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131015Z Oct 05

C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 KINSHASA 001705

SIPDIS

LABOR FOR DOL/ILAB TFAULKNER

E.O. 12958: DECL: 10/13/2015

TAGS: ELAB ECON PGOV SOCI CG

SUBJECT: TEACHERS' STRIKE: GDRC OFFER ON THE TABLE, BUT

STILL NO TAKERS

REF: KINSHASA 1672

Classified By: EconCouns G. Groth for reasons 1.4 b/d

¶1. (C) Summary. Private school students began returning to classrooms in Kinshasa on Monday, October 10, but public and parochial schools throughout the DRC remained closed, waiting for teachers' unions to come to an agreement with the GDRC on their salary demands. This was despite calls from leaders in many sectors of society to end the strike. The GDRC offer is for salaries between USD 50 and 100 per month, to be paid for the last three months of 2005 and at the same level in 2006. Striking teachers appear to be holding out for what they believe were minimum wage levels of about USD 200 per month, as agreed upon by some unspecified future date in the so-called Mbudi Agreement. End summary.

¶2. (C) The nationwide elementary, secondary, and professional level teachers' strike, which began on September 5 (reftel), continued this week. The two principal teachers' unions, SYECO and SYNECAT, are still rejecting GDRC offers and their members have stayed away from most public and parochial school classrooms, effectively shutting down all but private schools throughout the DRC. (Note: Most parochial schools, operated by Catholic, Protestant, and Kimbanguiste churches, are subsidized by the state and have government-hired teachers. End note.) Striking public and parochial school teachers in the interior of the country have also stayed away from classrooms, and have added calls for bonuses equal to those paid in Kinshasa (for example, transport) to the list of their demands. Private school teachers and students, meanwhile, began returning to classrooms in Kinshasa in near-normal numbers on Monday, October 10, and there have been no reports of violence or retaliation by outsiders.

¶3. (C) Striking teachers and their students stayed away from classrooms despite calls from a variety of government, private, religious, and even some other labor leaders to return to work. The most notable of these pronouncements was by Catholic Cardinal Etsou, Archbishop of Kinshasa, who collapsed during a Mass on October 9 before he was able to speak about the strike. In a message subsequently released to the press, Etsou called upon the government and teachers to find a solution. (Note: Cardinal Etsou spent one night in the hospital and released his comments on the school strike during a press conference held on October 12. End note.) Schools run by the Catholic Church in the DRC make up a large number of the parochial schools affected by the strike. The decision by the DRC Council of Catholic Bishops in July 2005 to suspend the practice of parents paying "motivation fees" to supplement teachers' salaries has played a role in this crisis.

¶4. (C) Econ Counselor spoke to Budget Minister Francois Muamba on October 12. Muamba laid out the GDRC offer to the teachers and explained the genesis of the problem. He said that the teachers' salary issue was two-fold before July 2003: low wages and sporadic, late payment. This, combined with high levels of inflation, made it hard for public and parochial school teachers to earn a living. Informal "motivation" fees paid by parents probably equalled or surpassed the 5,000 to 10,000 FC (little more than USD 10 - 20 per month) that teachers were theoretically receiving from the government. The Minister explained that the so-called Mbudi Agreement, signed by an outgoing minister in June 2003 and accepted by the new government that followed, had laid out a roadmap to address this problem. The agreement called for an eventual salary to the lowest paid civil servant of slightly over USD 200. According to the Minister, this was contingent upon the ability of the GDRC to generate sufficient receipts at some unspecified future time to be able to support these new wage levels.

¶5. (C) Based upon the first step of the Mbudi Agreement, teachers' salaries were nearly doubled in July 2003 and then increased to their current levels in May of this year, when the 2005 budget actually went into effect. According to Muamba, all teachers are now paid between about USD 40 - 50 per month. He explained that the current GDRC offer, based upon savings from the first four months of 2005, when

teachers were being underpaid, plus savings expected when the results of the nationwide teacher census become available, would allow the government to pay teachers between USD 50 and 100 per month, more than four times what they were earning in mid-2003. These new levels would begin before the end of October. Although the 2006 budget process has just begun, he said that these wage levels would be sustained for 2006, and might even be slightly higher if the third step of the Mbudi process was achieved. He noted that it might be a long time before the USD 200 per month figure is reached, since he estimated that it would require an overall budget in the USD five or six billion range to support that level of wages. (Note: Minister Muamba stated that, while teachers make up less than half the total of the estimated half a million civil servants in the DRC, their salary levels exceed those of their civil service counterparts, who also come under the Mbudi Agreement. End note.)

16. (C) So far, public and parochial school teachers have rejected the GDRC offer. Part of their discontent is over the government decision, and the parochial schools' agreement, to put a stop to the payment of the teacher "motivation fees" by parents. Minister Muamba acknowledged that, even with the proposed increases by the GDRC, teachers will be making less than they did before when the parents' contributions were factored in.

17. (C) Comment. The GDRC and the public/parochial school teachers appear to be still far apart on the issue of salary demands. The GDRC has been open about what it can do, given the budget constraints it faces. Teacher unions seem to have a misguided notion of what the Mbudi Agreement called for and when. Meanwhile, the elementary, secondary, and perhaps soon university-level students are facing a lost school year. This is potentially an explosive situation in an already tense pre-electoral environment where elections spoilers are ready to capitalize on social discontent to derail the electoral process. The GDRC can only hope that cooler heads will prevail and that the teachers will agree that a sustainable four-fold increase over salary levels of just over two years ago is a big step in the right direction. End comment.

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